Fantasy birder's guide

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A LIGHTWEIGHT BIRDING MODULE FOR OSR SYSTEMS

WHAT IS THIS MODULE?

This is a lightweight module for adding birdwatching to your fantasy tabletop campaign. It's made for OSR rules, but should fit any system.

Birdwatching is intended to be a fun side-activity players can engage in while on a hexcrawl or when moving between locations. It's meant to add some light risk/reward to gameplay, while immersing players in the ecology of their world.

> If you enjoy using this silly module, let me know on Bluesky (12z@bsky.social). I'd love to hear your stories!

WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THIS MODULE?

- Basic rules for birdwatching and 'photography'
- A supporting spell and magic item for bird 'photography'
- Bird-themed magic items to use as optional rewards
- A list of birds, their descriptions and habitats
- Appendix: Example bird encounter table for different habitats

RULES

1. FINDING BIRDS

Players can find birds while wandering through the wilderness.

Whenever you roll for an encounter in an outdoor hex, roll a **d6** to see if the players also find a bird. **The chance of finding a bird is 2-in-6.** You can increase the chance to 3-in-6 if the party has a druid or ranger, or if they are actively searching for birds.

If you roll a bird encounter, roll a **d6** to see which bird rarity the players encounter. Then, use the habitat/rarity table to determine which specific bird is found (See the Appendix for an example habitat table).

Roll (d6)	Bird rarity
1-3	Common
4-5	Uncommon
6	Rare

> Assume the players see the bird before it sees them, and that it's 30 yards away. Unless the bird is in the *large* category, they will need to risk getting close to get a good picture.

2. PHOTOGRAPHING BIRDS

Players may be content with finding birds and checking them off a list. However, they may also want evidence of their encounters with strange and exotic species — and some people or organizations may reward them for this evidence.

To get close enough to get a usable picture, a player must be within 30, 20 or 10 yards of the bird, depending on its size (large, medium, and small, respectively).

Bird size	Distance required for picture
Small	10 yards
Medium	20 yards
Large	30 yards

To close the distance, the player has two methods:

- **Approach silently:** roll under DEX to approach 10 yds. On a fail, the bird leaves.
- **Imitate call:** roll under WIS to attract bird 10 yds closer. On a fail, the bird leaves.

Once a player is within the required distance, they can photograph the bird.

> Approaching a bird requires time and care. If you want to add additional risk to birdwatching, roll a regular encounter after players attempt to get close to a bird.

PHOTOGRAPHY METHODS

If your setting does not already have photography, you may want to introduce it, though early cameras (such as daguerreotypes) may not be suitable for bird photography. Here are some fantasy alternatives:

Transfer sight
Level 1 Magic User spell
Duration: Instant
Whatever the caster is seeing is transferred into a held parchment, scroll or suitable writing material.
Reagents: The caster must be holding a piece of writing material and ink or another writing medium.
Result: Whatever the caster was seeing at the time of casting now exists as an image on a writing surface. The image is an approximation and is not completely photorealistic; the sketch also depends on the materials used, e.g. if ink is used, it will render a black and white image, and some detail may be lost.

Amber spyglass
Magic Item (1500g)
A large, heavy spyglass with some magnification. A receptacle to its side allows inserting 7x5 amber plates, which after activating a small lever will instantly render the image seen through the spyglass in an amber/sepia color.

Amber plates can be purchased for 50g or 100g for full color plates (or you can make the spyglass work with simple parchment or papyrus scrolls).

MAGIC ITEMS

You may want to reward players for taking good pictures of birds. A good way of doing this is by having an npc or organization (such as an ornithological club or guild) trade items or currency for pictures of birds. Common and uncommon can fetch gold prices (which factor into XP) and rare pictures may be traded for magic items. You can increase rewards as more rare pictures are turned in.

Rolling on a random magic item table is probably enough, and most systems already have bird-themed magic items, but here are some novel ones. Rebalance as needed.

STAFF OF MURMURATION

A long wooden, +1 quarterstaff (d4+1 blunt). Completely carved with birds of many sizes and species.
Effect: Can be used as a spellcasting focus by druids. *Once per day:* The player can summon a cloud of birds (10 feet tall, 20 feet radius) around the caster. Lasts for 3 turns. Acts similar to obscuring mist, blocking vision and infravision. Caster can see through the cloud and move it at will up to 30' per turn.

SWALLOWTAIL

A beautiful, lightweight +2 rapier (d6+2 piercing). A swallow adorns the handle; its long, forked tailed intertwines into the sharp, pointy blade.
Effect: The wielder becomes extremely agile, and is able to move 5ft after attacking. *Once per day:* Flutterstep: the magic of the blade lifts the wielder into the air for a plunging attack. The attack has a +5 to hit bonus and deals d10 base damage (+7 to hit, d10+2 total).

CROWFEATHER TIARA

A silver tiara adorned with feathers from the rogue magpie-jay.
Effect: The wearer is lightly compelled to grab and steal shiny objects, especially precious metals and gems.
Twice per day: The player can declare a specific type of metal or gems. The tiara then confers knowledge of the presence and direction of the declared material, if it exists within 40 yards.

PHOENIXWARBLER DOWN

An extremely rare feather of a young phoenix warbler. It's small, orange and gives off a warm glow.
Effect: If placed in a recently killed character's mouth, the body and belongings will instantly turn to ash, even unattached limbs. After d4 days, the character is reborn from the ashes, completely naked. Experience is retained, but memories may be fuzzy. Character might develop some birdlike features, like small feathers or clawed hands.

DRAGONSHRIKE SHIELD

A spiked, magical shield that confers the abilities and cruelty of the Dragonshrike, a large butcherbird that preys on and impales dragon hatchlings.
Effect: Grants +1 AC and +3 to Breath saves. Can be used to attack normally (d3). Small creatures struck by the sield must succed on a Death save or be impaled and die (at the Referee's discretion).

BIRD LIST

This section describes some of the birds that can be found by players, their rarity and usual habitats.

BLOOD TANAGER

Size: Small
Habitat: Open field (tropical)
Rarity: Rare

Small, bright red tanager of the tropics. Vampiric - will open wounds in cattle and other large animals and drink their blood. Chicks are white.

BRISTLY CURLEW

Size: Medium
Habitat: Coastal
Rarity: Common

A common shorebird that can be seen wading among tidal pools and rocks looking for small arthropods to eat. Its plumage is a creamy white, barred with light brown stripes. Some of the feathers of its body are bristly, and it will raise them at the sight of danger, similar to a hedgehog. Can fly, but not expertly.

DRAGONSHRIKE

Size: Large
Habitat: Temperate open fields and mountains
Rarity: Rare

Very large shrike with black eyemask and countershaded colors. Bottom is a sky-blue and the top is usually the color of its habitat (greener for fields and more rufous for mountains). Name comes from its habit of preying on hatchling dragons and impaling them on spiky rocks or branches. Will also prey on medium to large mammals and birds. Good at dodging breath attacks.

HYPNOTIC MANAKIN

Size: Small
Habitat: Tropical forest
Rarity: Uncommon

Black manakin with two long, broad stripes that run from beak to each of the tail strands. Looking at this bird for five or more seconds causes a deep, hypnotic sleep on a failed spell save.

LEVIATHAN SCISSORBILL

Size: Very large
Habitat: Coastal
Rarity: Rare

A gigantic bird of coastal environments. Rarely seen, as it breeds very infrequently. Its body is white, with large, black iridescent wings. Its beak is an intense red, which hides the fact that it's frequently covered in blood. Its arrival is heralded by the giant flapping of wings, and then by silence as it settles into a very fast and quiet glide over the water, skimming the surface for any large sea creature. After it captures its prey, it will glide back to the open sea.

LIONHERON

Size: Medium
Habitat: Coastal, lake and marshland
Rarity: Uncommon

Scruffy heron with cryptic plumage, colors somewhat dependent on habitat. Will hide in reeds or mangroves and ambush small reptiles, rodents or other birds. Hunts like a regular heron occasionally. Hard to spot due to camouflage.

PHASING TODY MOTMOT

Size: Small
Habitat: Tropical forest

Rarity: Rare

Handsome, small and round motmot of the tropics. Orange head with black eyemask, and iridescent green-blue body with characteristic tip. Hard to spot and photograph, as it blinks from branch to branch, seemingly at random and involuntarily.

PHOENIX WARBLER

Size: Small
Habitat: Temperate forest
Rarity: Rare

Small warbler with a curving crest. Sexes are identical, but color changes from bright red to orange to a dull yellow with age. After this final color change, they turn into ashes, from which a new bird emerges. If the bird was paired recently, two genetically identical birds may emerge. Young birds glow faintly in the night.

PYGMY OWLBEAR

Size: Medium
Habitat: Open field (tundra)
Rarity: Rare

Snow-white owlbear. Very small for an owlbear, about the size of a regular owl. Has wings, but vestigial claws are still present and can be used for mauling small prey. Very aggressive and territorial, but will avoid direct confrontations with larger animals.

RED-BILLED PTARMIGAN

Size: Small
Habitat: Open field (tundra)
Rarity: Common

Commonly seen near shrubs or on the open, frozen grasslands. Brown in the temperate seasons and a blinding white during winter. Their call can cause intelligent creatures to become enamored with the species, causing them to refuse to eat ptarmigans and to instead protect them from harm, within reason.

RED-HOODED ROCKPECKER

Size: Small
Habitat: Mountain
Rarity: Common

Brown bird with barred wings and a bright red hood. Fed iron-rich foods as a chick, including rock dust with iron traces. Has an iron-reinforced beak that it uses to drill into rock in search for rock grubs and other arthropods.

ROGUE MAGPIE-JAY

Size: Medium
Habitat: Open field (temperate)
Rarity: Common

Medium bird with dark blue body and white underside. Head is white, with a dark hood that resembles a thief's cloak. Will steal gold, keys and other shiny objects and stash them. Frequently a mascot of thieves guilds.

ROSEATE FORKBILL

Size: Large
Habitat: Lakes and marshes
Rarity: Rare

Large, long-legged wading bird. Bright pink with a grey head. Beak ends in three points that it uses to spear fish and other small animals, after which it grips them with its long tongue and shoves them into its mouth.

SAGE BUZZARD

Size: Medium
Habitat: Temperate forests and open fields, or wherever there are mage towers
Rarity: Uncommon

Medium raptor with bold, striped, black and white plumage. Hangs around mage towers and will pick off mice and other vermin that may live there. Strong resistance to magic, but will sometimes display strange, mostly harmless alterations due to magic contamination, such as shifting colors or partial invisibility.

SPOTTED GRACKLE

Size: Medium
Habitat: Tropical forests, lakes, marshland
Rarity: Common

Smart, omnivorous bird. Plumage is black, except for very contrasting white spots. No two individuals are alike, and some cultures have developed divination based on the spots of the grackle.

STREAKED CLAW-RUNNER

Size: Medium
Habitat: Mountains and tundra
Rarity: Uncommon

Primal looking, smart, two legged bird that retains its wing claws. Brown plumage with a black streak along its side. Poor flyer, but will run prey down quickly on the ground. Hunts in small packs.

TUFTED ORC-CROW

Size: Medium-large
Habitat: Temperate forests and tropical open fields, or anywhere where there are populations of intelligent creatures
Rarity: Common

A large, black crow. The male has crimson red tuft and wing tips. It will hang around dungeons and caves, and eat carrion produced from these places. They tend to have symbiotic relationships with dungeon and cave dwelling humanoids, and may feature in their heraldry.

Environment	Common	Uncommon	Rare
Coastal	Bristly curlew	Lionheron	Leviathan scissorbill
Lake or marshland	Spotted Grackle	Lionheron	Roseate forkbill
Forest (temperate)	Tufted orc-crow	Sage buzzard	Phoenix warbler
Forest (tropical)	Spotted grackle	Hypnotic manakin	Phasing tody motmot
Field (tundra)	Red-billed ptarmigan	Streaked claw-runner	Pygmy owlbear
Field (temperate)	Rogue magpie-jay	Sage buzzard	Dragonshrike
Field (tropical)	Tufted orc-crow	Hypnotic manakin	Blood tanager
Mountains	Red-hooded rockpecker	Streaked claw-runner	Dragonshrike

LICENSING

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